



Date: August 21, 2016

Title: "Walking Tall"

Scripture: Luke 13: 10-17

<sup>10</sup>Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.<sup>11</sup> And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup>When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."<sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup>But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." <sup>15</sup>But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?"<sup>16</sup> And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" <sup>17</sup>When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Description: The question is not, "Does God exist?" The important question is , "Does God care?" The woman in this story is one of the world's foremost authorities.

One by one they walked towards their fate. Some slowly, hesitantly, some almost running, as if to end the agony quickly. Arms hanging stiffly at their sides, hands clinched into fists, head bowed, eyes averted to the floor, searching for the chasm they prayed would open up and swallow them into the abyss of nothingness.

Watching them, their families beamed.

During the fifth grade class graduation ceremony, they did not wear caps and gowns, they did not enter to the music of Pomp and Circumstance. But the person at the P.A. did call their names individually, their signal to walk alone across the stage, meet the principal, and receive their certificate. The principal met them, smiled warmly as she presented the certificate, and whispered, "Stand up tall and look out there. Your family wants to take your picture." They obediently did as instructed. (Pantomime their response.)

But it looked like the effort was going to kill them. They were being honored; what would they have been like if they were being judged and criticized?

"She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight," Luke describes the woman in the synagogue that day long ago. "...a woman with a spirit that had crippled her..." (v. 11) Luke didn't have the benefits of an MRI and radioactive X-rays for diagnosis, but he was a physician and something made him sense that the cause of this woman's suffering was not physical. Not 100% physical, in any case.

Maybe something got hold of her when she was a child: a deforming illness, perhaps, or someone who mistreated her, heaping physical abuse on top of shame. Or maybe it was a loss, like when she was ten and her family moved and she suddenly and forever lost her best friend. Bible scholars and preachers get their imaginations in high gear, invoking any number of traumas to this poor woman's psyche and spirit.

But maybe it wasn't her internal spirit at all, but an oppressive and overpowering spirit imposed by the world around her. She was, after all, a woman, with few rights except for the right to bear children. A woman wasn't even supposed to enter the for-men-only area of the synagogue reserved for teaching and true prayer. She was regarded as having little more value than the ox or ass that Jesus spoke of in the confrontation that followed.

Whatever the cause, she was bent over and unable to stand up straight. She spent her years staring at the ground, able to look only at her own feet or the feet of others nearby. She could get an alternative view by painfully straining her neck or cutting her eyes sideways. When you spend 18 years looking down, you can miss a whole lot going on around you, that's for sure. In fact, when you spend all your time looking at *anything* you miss a whole lot of life going on around you.

You can imagine the result of 18 years of carrying heavy loads upon one's back. This "bent over" woman may have spent her life bearing children, carrying babies, tending a garden for food, and daily hauling water jugs far too heavy for her frame. As a woman, as a wife, she has little value, and as a worker, she is now limited. She has so little power that in this story, she doesn't even speak. She has no language. Let's not be too quick to analyze that her "bent over" spirit originated from some internal psychological cause within her. Eighteen years of living in an oppressive society will have its effect. It will get you down, physically and in spirit.

Jesus give that spirit a name. "This woman has been bound for Satan for eighteen years" (v. 16) Don't go with an image of a guy in a red suit with horns and a pitchfork. In the New Testament, the word "Satan" means "accuser." Satan's slogan is "bad dog!" and his weapon is guilt.

That kind of spirit has devastating effect on a being. Speaking of "bad dog", look at the body language when a message of guilt is delivered.

*(videos. Last scene: The accuser with his relentless message of guilt will cause a puppy to walk all bent over!)*

This encounter with Jesus didn't merely correct the woman's posture, it provided a new perspective. For the first time in decades, she can look straight into a friend's eye; she can gaze toward the sky. Her narrow vision is immediately broadened. The whole world is now in her line of sight.

That evening she stays up late, gazing into the night sky. "They're only stars," we'd observe, but stars seen for the first time are glorious, miraculous jewels of beauty. And the stars' view, looking down on a face full of dignity, mercy, and love, was more glorious still.

I expect we're all bent over in one way or another. We're all among the walking wounded. We all, to some extent, live "bent double." I don't know what you struggle with or what it is in your life that keeps you down or has claimed power over you and prevents you from standing tall. It may not show visibly, it may not make you completely dysfunctional. But I'll bet this bent-over woman's story is our story, too, for every one of us.

The religious leaders didn't want to let it be about this woman. They were offended and wanted it to be all about the rules. They didn't question that Jesus healed the woman or that her life was changed. They bellyached about Jesus doing such a thing on such a holy day. Eduard Schweizer agreed, along with several (male) scholars, writing that this is a confrontation story. It isn't about the woman at all; it's about the Sabbath.

I think the woman might have disagreed. And Jesus would have been the first to take her side. The religious leaders didn't like it. Suddenly this bent-over, stooped woman stood taller than they. She now had a story of being personally touched by...by God! And what did they have? They had scholastic degrees and ecclesiological robes. They had firm definitions of what behavior God accepted and who God appreciates. And what they had seemed awfully small compared to this woman, standing tall before them.

This story isn't just about this woman, however. It's also about God. Something like 90% of all Americans believe in God. The real question is "What kind of God?" Is God vengeful? Angry? Judgmental? Detached and unconcerned? Focused on a bigger agenda than what's going on in your little life? To that question, this woman becomes one of the world's authorities.

I spent a lot of years believing that God was at least slightly annoyed with me, disappointed with my character, and unimpressed with what I considered my faith. But most of all, believing that God was detached and unconcerned, because God had bigger things to deal with.

Enter Jesus. Into this story and into my story. In the middle of one of his teaching sessions, Jesus sees a woman who is practically invisible. Bent

over and crippled, she is literally easy to overlook. But Jesus sees her. He doesn't say a lot of words about performing a miracle or his power to heal her. He doesn't have to. Healing is just who Jesus is. It's what he does. When Jesus shows up, compassion begins to overflow, and wholeness emerges.

You can go with the standard image of God: high and lifted up, great and all-powerful, but very far away. Listen to some of the words people use to describe God, abstract, high-sounding words: omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, immortal. Without even knowing their definitions, they seem to say that God is a long way from here and whatever God is doing, God is not doing that with us.

Then, enter Jesus. And we face a decision: is Jesus the truth about who God is and what God is up to in the world. You've heard that one of Jesus's names was Emmanuel, "God With Us." The central, most important thing about God? God is up close and personal. Like I said, I spent the first part of my life thinking God was mad at me for something. Then I saw Jesus.

Jesus could have overlooked that hurting woman that day, could have preached to her some sweet sermon about bearing up under misfortune. He could have merely overlooked her while giving his attention to the more successful, more attractive people. The room was filled with people who studied the scripture, followed the rules. Jesus didn't do any of that. What he did was feel her pain and respond to her with healing mercy.

The big question is not, does God exist. The big question is, does God really care? That's the one you have to wrestle with, probably several times in the week ahead of you. That's the question you have to not think about but live with: Does God really care?

What does this story offer you in helping you figure out your answer?

Luke 13: 10-13

<sup>10</sup> Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. <sup>11</sup> And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." <sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God."